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INFERIOR AND SUPERIOR RACES

BY BOOKER T. WASHINGTON

ONE thing connected with the present war in Europe has particularly impressed me. It is the intimation that I have heard from time to time that this is, first of all, a race war and that it is, in the second place, a struggle to determine whether England or Germany shall rule the world.

I do not suppose that any one, who has thought about the matter, believes that it is possible to describe or even suggest, in any single phrase, all the motives that have gone into this mighty struggle. At any rate, I think it is safe to say that, back of all other causes, there is the ambition to be first, to be the leading power in the world. The nations do not desire to destroy each other, because each is necessary to the other, and the world would certainly be poorer, from every point of view, if either Germany, France, England, or Russia should suddenly drop out of it. What each belligerent desires, apparently, is not to destroy, but to cripple the other, to get its opponent at a disadvantage so that he will be compelled to accept a subordinate position. There is behind this war, in other words, the desire on the one hand to obtain a position of superiority, and, on the other, the fear that a superior position will be lost. And so important and necessary to the happiness of races and of nations is this superiority that in order to maintain it they are willing to sacrifice their own best blood and all the property which they have accumulated with so much pains and so much effort, and at the same time they are eager to destroy their neighbors' property and to kill and maim as many of their young men as is necessary to win.

Not only are they willing to inflict and to suffer in turn all these cruelties, but like some desperate gambler, they are prepared to risk their own future and their children's future on the chances of what to an outsider seems at best a doubtful victory, because, whoever wins, the masses of the people will

have to settle down and live side by side with the memories of all those who have died and those who have suffered and all the bitterness and hatred between them.

When I consider the cost of this war; when I think of the blood that has been shed; of the property that has been destroyed and the misery that has been caused—I am sometimes inclined to thank God that I am not a member of a superior race. Rather I am disposed to thank God that I belong to a people that cannot hope and does not desire to prosper at the cost of any other race.

There is a certain advantage in belonging to a race that has to make its way peacefully through the world; a race that prospers, if it prospers at all, because it has made friends rather than enemies of the people by whom it is surrounded. There is a certain satisfaction, also, in belonging to a race whose hope of success in the world consists in making itself useful to the world, and it is not wholly a disadvantage to the Negro that, though he should fight in every war as he has in this, it is not to maintain his own superiority, but that of some other race, that he fights.

These considerations have raised in my mind the question as to what it is, exactly, that we mean when we speak of racial superiority. In particular it has raised the question in regard to the subject races or those occupying second or third place in the world, what should they think and what sort of superiority should they strive for.

For example, it is said that the present war brings us one step nearer to a war with Japan, and from now on, perhaps, we shall be watching anxiously and eagerly everything that is said or done by Japan, always with the suspicion that whatever is said or whatever is done it is something to be feared, something to be resisted.

But this talked-of war with Japan, it is said again, is merely the beginning of a bigger and more terrible world war which must some day take place between the dark-skinned and the light-skinned races of the earth. It is assumed that the dark-skinned people, who are now classed along with the Slavs as inferior peoples, will infallibly imitate the example of the superior races; that they will plot and plan and secretly contrive means for overcoming those who stand above them, meanwhile interpreting every action of their rivals in the worst possible light and unconsciously employing every possible means to incite fear and hate, so that at last, when their

hour finally strikes, the lesser peoples will be ready and willing to rise up and throw off the protection which the stronger races have imposed upon them. In that case the fear and hate which they have cherished secretly in their hearts will give them courage to be as ruthless in their rebellion as the superior races are likely to be in suppressing it. And they will do this in order to convince themselves and the rest of the world that they are really not inferiors, but the equals, if not the superiors, of the white races.

Such seems to be the programme which it is generally presumed that those who are now regarded as inferior races—though of course they do not regard themselves so—will pursue with regard to the superior races, the races in control. This is, I have no doubt, an attractive programme to some persons, particularly agitators, and as there seems to be even more agitators among white people than among colored, I have no doubt there are many white people to whom this seems a perfectly proper and natural method of procedure. For one thing, the very general belief that it is the natural course to take under the conditions in which the white and the dark races now live, is the excuse for the harsh measures that it seems necessary to use now and then to keep the lesser peoples in their lesser places.

There is, however, for races and nations, as well as for individuals, more than one way to be superior. One race may, for example, be superior to the other by the simple process of getting on top and holding the other down. It may, however, become superior by learning to do some one thing better than any one else in the world. And this may be a very simple thing; it may be raising cotton or it may be writing a book.

There is only room for one race, one group, and finally one individual to be superior, if superiority consists in holding a place on top with every one else somewhere between that place and the bottom. On the other hand, there is opportunity for almost every one to be superior if superiority consists in performing some kind of useful service in an exceptional manner. Almost every race and almost every individual possesses some gifts that make it or him exceptional. There is almost certain to be some directions in which an individual or a race may be of greater service than in others. To seek and find that place is to be successful. To fill that place in an exceptional way is to be superior.

Therefore, the races which are down and are seeking to rise should consider this road to superiority. They will make a

mistake if they imitate the superior races in the struggle for a superiority that is grounded on force and conquest. We should ask each nation that claims to be superior, before we accept it as such and set it up as a model for ourselves, in what precisely its superiority consists. Nations, races, and individuals should not be classed as superior simply, but we should know in what they are superior and then we can determine whether we desire to imitate them.

What we should strive to do, to put it simply and squarely, is contribute our part toward bringing into existence a civilization in which superiority is based on service, and not contribute more than we have to to maintain a civilization in which superiority is based on force. We should look forward to a civilization based on racial peace rather than one based on racial war and racial subjugation.

Such a conclusion will seem very simple-minded and quite impractical. To choose such a course would mean that the lesser peoples, in their struggle upward, must be willing to plod painfully, patiently forward, winning their way as they go, proving that in each gain they make for themselves they are at the same time enriching the world at large, that in each step upward they have lifted not merely themselves, but the whole world above them.

Perhaps no race or people would choose to advance in this way, unless it was compelled to do so. It is much more thrilling to be able to feel that, just because you know your own worth better than any one else, you likewise have the courage to make peremptory demands upon the world for what is plainly your due, and then enforce these demands, if necessary, with the shedding of blood.

However, it will be a long time before the little brown people of the world will be in a position to enforce their claims in this way. The black people of Africa may never be in that position.

Meanwhile it is well to remember a very large part of the actual progress of the world in the past has been made by the farmer and the mechanic, those who reap and those who build, rather than by the soldier with his implements of destruction. Thrift, industry, and patience are still the staples of human progress, and the peculiarity about them is this, that, while they may belong separately to individuals or races, they are counted as part of the common capital because while they make no man's life poorer they make the whole world richer.

Not only has this been so in the past, but I believe it is going

to be true in an increasing degree in the future. It is part of the task of civilization to do away with war; it is also a part of the task of civilization to do away with agitations that lead to war, agitations directed against persons and races; agitations that distort facts and provoke prejudice; agitations that emphasize only the points at which there is conflict and minimize the points at which there is co-operation.

Superiority in the future will depend more upon excellence in some service for the common good and less upon success on the field of battle. I look forward to a time when no individual and no race will be considered superior to another merely because, being on top, he or it is able to hold that other race or the other individual down.

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON.